

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Balthis House

other names/site number E.C. Balthis Blacksmith Shop Property, Balthis' Old Stand, VDHR File No. 112-0009

2. Location

street & number 55 Chester Street not for publication
city or town Front Royal vicinity
state Virginia code VA county Warren code 187 Zip 22630

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this x nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property x meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide x locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official Date

Virginia Department of Historic Resources

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:

 entered in the National Register

 See continuation sheet.

 determined eligible for the

National Register

 See continuation sheet.

 determined not eligible for the National Register

 removed from the National Register

 other (explain): _____

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

U. S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service

Balthis House
Town of Front Royal, Warren County, Virginia

5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

- ☒ private
☐ public-local
☐ public-State
☐ public-Federal

Category of Property (Check only one box)

- ☒ building(s)
☐ district
☐ site
☐ structure
☐ object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing
<u> 2 </u>	<u> 2 </u> buildings
<u> 0 </u>	<u> 0 </u> sites
<u> 1 </u>	<u> 0 </u> structures
<u> 0 </u>	<u> 0 </u> objects
<u> 3 </u>	<u> 2 </u> Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

 N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: DOMESTIC Sub: single dwelling
 DOMESTIC secondary structure

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Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: RECREATION/CULTURE Sub: museum

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Balthis House
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7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)EARLY REPUBLIC/Federal

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)Foundation STONE/Limestone

roof METAL/Tin

walls WOOD/Weatherboard; BRICK

other

Narrative Description (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- ☐ A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

- ☐ A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ B removed from its original location.
- ☐ C a birthplace or a grave.
- ☐ D a cemetery.
- ☐ E a reconstructed building, object or structure.
- ☐ F a commemorative property.
- ☐ G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance ca. 1787-1954

Significant Dates ca. 1787; 1952-54

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Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Cultural Affiliation _____

Architect/Builder unknown

Narrative Statement of Significance (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References**Bibliography**

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS)

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data

- ☒ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other

Name of repository: _____

10. Geographical DataAcreage of Property .5676 acres

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	17	743560	4311320	2	_____	_____
3	_____	_____	_____	4	_____	_____

See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared Byname/title: Beth ScrippsOrganization: Frazier Associates date 2/9/04street & number: 213 N. Augusta Street telephone 540.886.6230city or town Staunton state VA zip code 24401

U. S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service

Balthis House
Town of Front Royal, Warren County, Virginia

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets**Maps**

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Warren Heritage Society

street & number 101 Chester Street telephone 540.636.0702

city or town Front Royal state VA zip code 22630

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

**United States Department of the Interior
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**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

**Balthis House
Town of Front Royal, Warren County, Virginia**

Section 7 Page 1

Summary Description:

Dwelling

Located in the Front Royal Historic District, Balthis House is a vernacular interpretation of the Federal-style town house popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and a rare surviving example of its type in Front Royal. Also of note is the existence of the dwelling's original kitchen dependency. Significant later additions were made in the mid-nineteenth century when the street façade was lengthened by two bays and a brick rear ell was added.

The lot runs seventy-three feet along Chester Street and is approximately 270 feet deep which equates to a lot size of just over half an acre. The site is relatively flat with brick walks between outbuildings, several deciduous trees and numerous boxwoods. In addition to the kitchen outbuilding, there is a summerhouse/gazebo that, according to local legend, was built in the late nineteenth century as a playhouse, and two mid-twentieth-century outbuildings.

The original dwelling was built as a two-story, three-bay, side-passage-plan dwelling and fronts directly onto Chester Street. The side-gabled roof is covered with standing-seam metal and the exterior of this timber-framed dwelling is clad in weatherboard. There is a rebuilt limestone chimney on the original north gable end that is now an interior chimney due to a later addition. Windows in the earliest portion of the dwelling are wooden, six-over-six, double-hung sash.

A mid-nineteenth-century frame addition increased the building façade by two bays and is clad in a combination of German siding and weatherboard. A five-course American-bond brick rear ell of the same period extends from the east (rear) elevation of the original house. Windows in both additions are predominantly six-over-nine, double-hung sash with the exception of the second-story windows on the street façade, which are wood, six-over-six, double-hung sash. Gable roofs on both additions are clad in standing-seam metal.

The interior of the dwelling retains the original layout of rooms, with the main stair attached to the south wall of the entry hall. Many doors, mantels, chair rails, and other architectural features were salvaged from neighboring houses on Chester Street prior to their demolition in the mid-twentieth century.

Outbuildings

The kitchen dependency is a one-room, 1 1/2-story, frame outbuilding with a standing-seam metal roof, German siding, four-over-four, double-hung sash windows on the first level, and four-light casement windows above. The composite masonry chimney is constructed of irregularly coursed limestone to the ceiling height of the first story and running bond brick above. The half-story is accessed by a closed stair with a board-and-batten door. Other outbuildings on the property include a summerhouse/gazebo (perhaps built as a playhouse in the late nineteenth century); a smokehouse built in the mid-twentieth century with salvaged logs; and a frame loom house also built in the mid-twentieth century.

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**Balthis House
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Detailed Description

SITE

Balthis House is located at 55 Chester Street in Front Royal, on a site that slopes gently from west to east. The primary (historic) elevation faces west and the sidewalk for Chester Street abuts this façade and hides most of the foundation. A white picket fence extends from the north gable end of the house to the north property line. To the south, a gravel drive with a modern metal gate provides vehicular access to the property and runs along the property line and alongside the rear ell addition. To the north, the property is flanked by the Confederate Rifles Museum, built on the site of the original Balthis blacksmith shop. The yard to the rear of the property contains the original kitchen dependency, a summerhouse/gazebo at the east property line that, according to local legend, was built as a playhouse and dates to the post-Civil War era, and a smokehouse and loom house of mid-twentieth-century design. The landscape is Colonial Revival in design and features American boxwood planted in the mid-twentieth century as foundation and accent plants and brick walks that connect the outbuildings. There is a large walnut tree to the rear/northeast of the kitchen dependency.

HOUSE

Early deed references indicate that the original dwelling on this site was built on a foundation measuring twenty-eight feet by thirty-four feet. The existing portion of the original side-passage-plan structure now measures twenty-seven by eighteen feet. On the east, west, and north elevations, the foundation is predominantly below grade. This is especially evident on the street façade, where weatherboard siding rests directly on the modern aggregate sidewalk. The brick ell to the southeast of the original house is fifteen-and-a-half feet by thirty-one feet. The north frame addition extends the street façade seventeen feet and is equal in depth to the original portion of the house.

Original House

The earliest portion of the structure is a two-story, three-bay, side-passage-plan, timber-framed dwelling that measures twenty-seven feet on its Chester Street elevation. This late-eighteenth-century portion of the house is built on a foundation of uncut limestone rubble laid in irregular courses and is constructed of joined timber framing. Clad in weatherboards, an exposed portion of the east wall in the parlor demonstrates the builder used brick nogging to fill in the space between plaster and weatherboard. Other features include six-over-six, double-hung windows, a simple box cornice, and a standing-seam metal gable roof. The crawl space under this part of the house is accessed from a poured concrete bulkhead located to the north of the porch on the rear ell's east elevation.

What would have originally been a gable-end chimney on the original portion of the house became an interior chimney with the north addition in the mid-nineteenth century. This chimney is of coursed limestone construction and has been rebuilt and repointed with Portland cement. A simple, wood, box cornice extends across the front and back elevations of the frame portion of the house with returns on the gable ends. This eave detail continues on the brick addition.

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The mid-twentieth-century, recessed, five-panel, wood front door of Balthis House replaced an earlier door of the same design and is located in the southernmost bay of the west elevation with access from the sidewalk via a twentieth-century brick stoop.

Frame Addition

A two-story frame addition, built in the mid-nineteenth century, extends the street façade by two bays and is partially clad in German siding. With this addition, the street façade, then and now, measures forty-three feet. The gable roofline extends from the original house and is likewise clad in standing-seam metal. Windows in this addition are primarily six-over-nine, double-hung sash. A raised, six-panel, wood door is located in the center of the north elevation of the mid-nineteenth-century frame addition, and a matching door can be found on the east elevation of this addition in its southernmost bay. The north door is sheltered by a one-story, one-bay porch constructed in the mid-twentieth century. It features a brick stoop and piers and a walnut balustrade that originally was part of the hall stairs of the Petty House¹.

Brick Addition

A two-story, three-bay rear ell, also added in the mid-nineteenth century, measures fifteen feet north to south and thirty-one feet east to west. It is constructed of brick laid in a five-course American-bond pattern with a standing-seam metal roof. Windows in this addition are primarily six-over-nine, double-hung sash. The brick addition features an interior chimney of running-bond brick construction with a corbelled cap. Mechanicals for the house are located in the partial basement to the rear of this ell.

On the north elevation of the rear ell a four-bay porch, built in the 1950s, replaced an earlier double porch shown on the 1912 Sanborn Map for Front Royal. The current porch was most likely built reusing some of the materials removed from the earlier porch on the Gilkey addition that was razed between 1950 and 1959. This open porch spans the full length of the brick rear ell and is accessed from its eastern end via brick stairs of twentieth-century origin. Built on a foundation of honeycomb brickwork terminating in a fascia board trim, the tongue-and-groove board floor runs perpendicular to the plane of the addition. A series of turned wooden posts support the standing-seam metal shed roof. A balustrade composed of square balusters, ("copies of the original ones"²) is attached to a subrail and terminates in an oval-shaped handrail. The handrail is made of walnut and came from the hall stairs of the Petty House.³

From the rear ell porch, there are two entrances into the addition, both with louvered storm doors of contemporary origin. The door from the porch to the kitchen features a four-light, two-panel design and the door from the porch to the dining room is a raised, two-panel, wood door in keeping with the period of the addition's construction.

In the early twentieth century, a frame addition was constructed to the north of and parallel to the brick rear ell. Known as the Gilkey addition, it was razed in the 1950s.

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INTERIOR

A number of details in the Balthis House were reused from locally significant houses along Chester Street that were razed in the first half of the twentieth century. Much of the trim in the house is not original. The chair rails are in all instances a later addition, whether copied from originals found in the house or salvaged from other houses in the neighborhood. The chair rails in the hall and parlor are copied from the original flush-bead chair rail found under the stairs, which has been built up with additional molding over the years, probably when the brick addition was constructed. All other chair rails in the house have a Petty House provenance.

Original House

The first floor contains a passage/stair hall, and a partition wall that divides the parlor from the stair hall. The open-stringer main stair is located on the south wall of this hall and is constructed of rectangular, simple square balusters, a hand-planed rail, and a turned newel. The entry hall is the only room in this portion of the house in which the original, random-width, heart-pine floorboards remain. An unpainted beaded-board partition divides the passage from the parlor. The remaining walls in these rooms are plaster on brick. Ceilings in the hall and parlor consist of stained beaded joists, between which plaster was added at a later date.

Original doors in this portion of the house include raised six-panel wooden doors leading from the hall to the parlor and the five-panel door, similar to the front door, which leads from the hall to the dining room. The two six-panel wooden doors that lead from the parlor to the north parlor came from the Boone House next door.⁴ The mantel in the parlor is from the Gideon Jones House at the corner of Manassas and Chester Streets.⁵

The upstairs hall runs along the east wall and two bedrooms open onto it. An enclosed stair, accessed by a board-and-batten door with bail handle, connects the second-floor hall to the attic of this portion of the house. Upstairs, exterior walls are plaster-over-brick, while the interior walls in both bedrooms are wide, hand-planed, beaded boards. Beaded exposed joists show signs of attached lath but are otherwise in keeping with joists in the parlor below. Ceilings are exposed joists with plaster infill. Walls are plaster on the east (exterior) side of the hall and wide, beaded boards on the west (interior) side. A chair rail continues from the downstairs hall.

Upstairs, the wood board-and-batten door from the hall to bedroom #1 has HL hinges and a brass box lock on the hall side and is from the Boone House. The small, board closet door is original, as is the board-and-batten door to the attic with its bail handle. The six-panel door from the hall to bedroom #2 and the five-panel door to the closet in this bedroom have a Petty House provenance. All other doors in this section of the house came from the Boone House.⁶ The mantel in bedroom #2 upstairs is from the Petty House.⁷

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Frame Addition

The first-floor room of this mid-nineteenth-century addition is a parlor, with a bedroom above and a twentieth-century bathroom at the north end of the upstairs hall. In this addition, modern, narrower floorboards were installed over the original most likely between 1951 and 1962. In the parlor addition on the first floor, all four walls are covered in contemporary plaster and the ceiling is plaster over plasterboard. The bedroom above has plaster on the south, north, and west walls and the ceiling. On the east wall, which is shared with a modern bathroom, the finish is plaster over plasterboard. Ceilings are plain finished plaster in this addition.

In the north parlor, the mantel originated in the Dorsey House across the street. In bedroom #3, the mantel is from the Boone House as are the two raised, six-panel doors that were reused from the Boone House and retain their original locks. The closet door was originally the door leading from the front hall to the cellar in the Boone house. The door to the mid-twentieth-century bathroom is from the Petty House.⁸

Brick Addition

This mid-nineteenth-century addition contains a dining room and kitchen on the first floor and a large bedroom and smaller bedroom (now a bath) above. A winder stair provides access from the kitchen to a smaller bedroom above. A small, enclosed winder stair leads from the kitchen to the upstairs landing off the present bathroom. The heart-pine kitchen floor is consistent with the date of the addition's construction. In the remainder of the addition, modern, narrower floorboards were installed over the original most likely in the mid-twentieth century.

Ceilings in the dining room and kitchen have been replastered. Plaster walls in the dining room are covered with contemporary wallpaper. Walls in the kitchen are plaster-over-brick with chair rail/shelf under which is beaded-board wainscoting terminating in baseboards typical of the period. Walls and ceiling are plaster in the bedroom above the dining room. In the contemporary bath adjoining this bedroom, the exterior wall and ceiling are plastered. The south wall is a wood partition to the east of the door and plasterboard west of the door.

All doors on the first level of this addition are original. In the dining room, doors to the porch, kitchen, and closet are vertical two-panel doors in a style typical of the mid-nineteenth century. The mantel in the dining room was originally in the newer brick part of the Petty House. Upstairs, the door from the hall to bedroom #4 is from the Petty House, as well as the mantel. The door from this room to the back stair hall is of the same style found in the dining room and is most likely original. The mantel in the smaller bedroom, now a bathroom, was moved to this room from its original location in bedroom #2.⁹

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**Balthis House
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OUTBUILDINGS

To the east of the rear ell is a kitchen dependency. Construction details date this structure to the latter half of the eighteenth century or early nineteenth century, contemporary with the original dwelling on the site. German siding now gives this outbuilding a later appearance.

Other original outbuildings, a stable and smokehouse, noted when James Reid bought the property from James Moore in 1787,¹⁰ no longer exist. The smokehouse that now sits behind the house is a modern replica, at a reduced scale, of a smokehouse from a farm in the vicinity and was built out of salvaged material. The stable most likely sat along the north property line. A contemporary loom house was constructed near this site in the mid-twentieth century.

Other buildings on the property include a summerhouse or gazebo structure that, according to local legend, was built as a playhouse in the post-Civil War period and a blacksmith shop/warehouse/plumbing supply structure that fronted Chester Street and was built during the Balthis family ownership and razed in the mid-twentieth century.

Kitchen

This side-gabled, German-siding-clad outbuilding with a limestone and brick chimney and a standing-seam metal roof has two six-over-six and two four-over-four, double-hung sash windows on the first floor and two four-light casement windows in the loft/attic. A board-and-batten door provides entry to the structure.

The first level is floored in brick. Walls are frame with brick nogging and have been whitewashed. Most of the floor joists are original although there are two scabbed joists that exhibit circular saw marks. The fireplace contains a metal fireback and what appears to be period hardware including a cooking crane. The stair to the loft is enclosed in hand-planed beaded boards. The loft floor is made up of wide floorboards, and pole-pegged mortise-and-tenon rafters support the roof. The limestone step at the door is a twentieth-century addition with a Petty House provenance.

Smokehouse

A reduced-scale replica of the smokehouse at Spurmont, now Signal Knob Farm, on the outskirts of the nearby town of Strasburg, the smokehouse was built in the mid-twentieth century with logs from the Petty House.¹¹ Resting on a concrete foundation, it is constructed of squared, hewn, v-notched logs with a hipped standing-seam metal roof.

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Section 7 Page 7

Summerhouse/Gazebo (Playhouse)

According to local legend, Civil War veterans constructed the playhouse in the late 1860s.¹² This one-room, standing-seam metal, hip-roofed structure exhibits a mortised framing system, studded walls/braces, a beaded tongue-and-groove board ceiling, and a painted tongue-and-groove board floor. The north, south, and west walls are sheathed in diagonal lattice and the structure now sits on a cinderblock foundation. Joists, sills, and studs display straight saw marks. These elements may have been reused from an earlier structure. Later additions to the structure include asbestos shingles and Mission/Craftsman applied decorative elements. Of special note is the early ironwork chain and board swing that hangs from the ceiling.

Loom House

Built on a cement block foundation, and clad in German siding that may have been reused from the razed frame ell, with six-over-six, double-hung sash windows, this standing-seam-metal-roofed, front-gabled, two-bay structure was built between 1952 and 1959. The interior remains unfinished. The lower portion of the chimney predates the current structure and may have belonged to one of the former outbuildings on the site. The upper portion of the chimney dates to the mid-twentieth century and serves no purpose as it does not bring the chimney into scale with the building or make it functional. The entry door on the west elevation is of board-and-batten construction using tongue-and-groove boards. The front stoop is of twentieth-century brick construction.

ENDNOTES

¹ Samuels, *Balthis House Notes*, 9.

² Ibid., 10.

³ Ibid., 9.

⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁹ Ibid., 2-3.

¹⁰ Hale, *On Chester Street: Presence of the Past, Patterns of the Future*, 201.

¹¹ Samuels, *Balthis House Notes*, 11.

¹² Ibid., 11.

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**Balthis House
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Section 8 Page 8

Statement of Significance

Located at 55 Chester Street in the Town of Front Royal, the Balthis House consists of an original side-passage-plan frame dwelling built around 1787, a brick rear ell built during the mid-nineteenth century, and a north frame addition which was also constructed in the mid-nineteenth century. The yard to the rear of the property contains the original kitchen dependency, a summerhouse/gazebo that, according to local legend, dates to the late nineteenth century, and a smokehouse and loom house of mid-twentieth-century construction.

The Balthis House is architecturally significant as the oldest surviving structure on Chester Street, the oldest street in Front Royal, and the property's detached kitchen is the town's only surviving example. Although once a common property type throughout the town of Front Royal, the dwelling and detached kitchen complex is the last such eighteenth-century example surviving in the town. These two buildings are also significant as the town's only known surviving examples of brick infill construction.

The Balthis House was renovated during the mid-twentieth century using architectural elements salvaged from nearby razed houses on Chester Street. This type of renovation represents a popular mid-twentieth-century preservation philosophy in which architectural elements from various demolished buildings were deemed appropriate for placement in a surviving house of the same period. By carrying out this renovation project, Dr. Bernard Samuels, owner of the property from 1952 to 1961, transformed the Balthis House into a veritable museum of local architectural craftsmanship. Woodwork from the eight-room brick Cheek-Fant-Petty House, built prior to 1794; the frame two-over-two-room Dorsey House built between 1800-1818; and the 1870 Italianate-style Gideon Jones House was salvaged and reinstalled in the Balthis House.

The original frame section of the house dates to the ownership of James Reid, who occupied the property from 1787 to 1802. Subsequent owners included: Thomas Buck from 1802 to 1829, who was an early town trustee, justice of the peace, and captain of Buck's Minute Men in the Revolution; local educator Samuel Simpson from 1829 to 1838; the Balthis family of blacksmiths from 1838 to 1906; the Gilkey family of plumbers from 1906 to 1952; and Dr. Bernard Samuels from 1952 to 1961. Since 2000 the property has been owned by the Warren County Heritage Society.

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**Balthis House
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Section 8 Page 9

Historical Background – Front Royal

Chester Street, which was first called Happy Creek Thoroughfare, was renamed after Thomas Chester who operated a ferry across the Shenandoah River, the first legally licensed ferry west of the Blue Ridge dating to 1736.¹

As settlement in the area increased, Chester Street evolved as part of the well-traveled route from Winchester across the Blue Ridge via Chester Gap to Orange Court House.² Chester Street “became a farm to market route as the Valley was settled, and a village grew from a camping place for teams and tented wagons wending their tedious way to the tidewater ports of Alexandria and Falmouth and the nation’s capital.”³

The town of Front Royal was incorporated in 1788. By the early years of the nineteenth century, Front Royal contained “about sixty houses, a Methodist Chapel, an Academy, a mill and several stores.”⁴ When Warren County was formed from Frederick County in 1836, Front Royal was named the county seat.⁵ At the beginning of the nineteenth century the census shows the population of Front Royal to be 254, doubling by 1850 to 504.⁶

The first train arrived in Front Royal in October 1854 and in the 1860s Front Royal was still a crossroads town of strategic importance, providing convenient access to Luray and the Upper Valley to the south; Winchester and Harper’s Ferry to the north; and eastern Virginia by way of roads through Chester and Manassas Gaps, and especially the vital Manassas Gap Railroad.⁷

Front Royal was a prospering wagon manufacturing center in 1838 when E.C. Balthis, a blacksmith, bought the property situated on the town’s main road and in the heart of the town’s wagon manufacturing area. Other early commercial sites of this nature included Henry Trout’s wheelwright shop, John Stephenson’s mechanics shop and John H. Steele’s coach making shop and residence on the west side of Chester Street⁸ where the town’s parking lot is now located. The building at 29 Chester Street, now referred to as the Samuels Apartments, and built prior to 1817, was the residence for the Trout family of wheelwrights and is located on the east side of Chester Street near the Balthis House.

Cozy Corner, at 64 Chester Street, was built after 1900 on what is possibly the site of the Trout wagon factory, a major economic force in antebellum Front Royal that brought business to blacksmiths, saddlers, merchants, and farmers. Chains, hubs, and irons for the wagon beds were supplied by the blacksmiths, William Balthis, Joseph Snapp, H. Saffell, and Charles and William Sumption. An 1837 list of “prices for smith work that Mr. Balthis and Snapp have agreed to work at for 12 months” included “for ironing a one-horse wagon complete \$14.00.”⁹

123 Chester Street, the original site of the Petty-Sumption House, a dwelling that dates to between 1816 and 1831, also had a wagon shop, blacksmith shop, and stable. The dwelling was moved across

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the street in 1923 to its present site, the former site of the Sumption blacksmith shop. Sumption tore down the brick blacksmith shop of his grandfather to put the present house in its place. The house was built of logs and covered with weatherboard, then stucco and “had a large room downstairs, three rooms upstairs and a large attic in the log part, with a one-story frame addition on the south side, the entire building weatherboarded.” When Mr. Sumption moved the house he put the frame part on the back instead of the side.¹⁰

Historical Background – Architecture

The Balthis House is significant as the oldest surviving structure on Chester Street, the oldest street in Front Royal and a street that has historically been “home to the leading families of the area”.¹¹ The kitchen dependency is the only surviving example of a detached kitchen in the town. The original timber-frame section of the house dates to ca. 1787 and the dwelling was built on property whose history of ownership includes two trustees named in the 1788 charter incorporating the town of Front Royal, George Cheek and James Moore.

Twice the prosperous Balthis family that owned the property during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries enlarged the dwelling. These additions accommodated the extended family and modernized the house by bringing the kitchen indoors. When the house was renovated in the mid-twentieth century, a number of details salvaged from other early homes on Chester Street were incorporated into the Balthis House.

The buildings on the Balthis House property include the main house, an original kitchen, a mid-twentieth-century smokehouse and loom house, and a playhouse/summerhouse/gazebo constructed of salvaged materials some of which date to the mid-nineteenth century. Visible historic building materials and methods of construction, as well as historical research indicate that the oldest part of the main house and the kitchen outbuilding were probably constructed in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries, while the frame and brick additions were constructed in the mid-nineteenth century.

According to local legend, the playhouse dates to the post-Civil War period and although older materials were used in its construction, visual inspection makes this dating questionable. In the mid-twentieth century, a reduced-scale replica of an eighteenth-century smokehouse was added in the kitchen yard and a loom house was constructed to the rear of the house adjacent to the north property line.

The Balthis House was built as a side-passage-plan dwelling, a common form in early-nineteenth-century Front Royal. Another house on Chester Street, the Mullan-Trout House at 12 Chester Street, was built prior to 1815, and shares this plan. According to a local historian, “through the years the original log exterior had been covered with white plaster and still after with sand stucco but there remained the typical old mantels, four-panel doors, small-paned windows, and huge chimneys with

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fireplaces.”¹² According to the same source, the Jackson Home at 14 Chester Street (razed) was also similar in construction and dated from the early 1800s.¹³ From photographic inspection, the original trim details in both Balthis House and Mullan-Trout House are of similar design.

At 43 Chester Street, next-door to Balthis House, is Chester House, built in the early 1900s on the site of an earlier house. Old photographs of the previous house indicate it was positioned, like Balthis House, flush with the sidewalk. The street elevation of the house was four bays wide and featured nine-over-six windows on the first level and six-over-six on the second. The front door was located in the second bay from the north. The only chimney for the house was located on the south elevation and a wide board fence enclosed the yard on the street elevation.¹⁴

Main House

The earliest portion of the Balthis House is a two-story, three-bay, side-passage-plan, timber-framed dwelling that measures twenty-seven feet along its Chester Street elevation. Elements that remain from the initial period of construction include the limestone foundation, weatherboard siding, and many of the wooden sash windows. Inside, original fabric includes the random-width, heart-pine floorboards in the entry hall, the partition with its six-panel door on the first floor, and beaded-board elements in the bedrooms upstairs.

In the mid-nineteenth century a brick rear ell was added to the east elevation of the original house to contain a kitchen and dining room on the first level and a servant's room and bedroom upstairs. Many of the original doors and trim details remain in this addition. Also in the mid-nineteenth century, a frame addition on the street elevation added the north parlor on the first floor and a bedroom above.

Dr. Bernard Samuels used mantels, doors, chair boards, brass locks, and other woodwork from the Cheek-Fant-Petty House (razed) in renovating Balthis House. This dwelling, also on Chester Street, was built prior to 1794 and was described as brick with a plastered exterior in a survey of homes by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1939. The survey noted two peculiar five-paneled doors, having a large square panel in the center with two small square panels at the top and two at the bottom, large original chimneys and fireplaces in eight rooms, a high mantel in the southeast front room, and a lower one in the northeast front room.

Additional items were salvaged from the Dorsey House, built between 1800 and 1818, as a two-story, single-pile, center-hall-plan building of log/frame construction. The third house that contributed salvaged items to Balthis House was the Italianate-style Gideon Jones House at 106 Chester Street, built in 1870. Previous houses on the Jones lot were referred to as “small house” and “dwelling.” Blacksmith Snapp lived in the small house and rented the shop. This house was built on the site of earlier structures.

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Outbuildings

The kitchen dependency is contemporary to the earliest portion of the house, as is evidenced in the method of construction. Later elements include German siding, shelving added in the twentieth century, and sisters used to reinforce joists.

According to local legend, Confederate veterans built a playhouse structure for local children in the late 1860s. By the turn of the century, this playhouse had been enclosed and incorporated into a cabin. "At the turn of the century it was part of a cabin in which John and Julia Wanzer lived with their children, a highly respected colored family. John worked as a helper and striker in the C.F. Sumption blacksmith shop. Access to his home from Chester Street was known as 'Wanzer Lane' and ran along the south side of the Balthis House lot."¹⁵ The lane giving access to this dwelling ceases to be delineated on the Sanborn Maps by 1912. The structure was apparently used as a summerhouse or gazebo sometime during the twentieth century.

The smokehouse adjacent to the kitchen dependency is a reduced-scale replica of a smokehouse from nearby Signal Knob/Spurmont Farm. It was constructed of logs salvaged when the Cheek-Fant-Petty slave house was torn down in the mid-twentieth century and sits on a concrete foundation.

The loom house or workshop was built between 1950 and 1959 and reuses siding from the twentieth-century ell that was razed at that time. All other building materials are contemporary to the date of construction.

Historical Background - Ownership

The early history of the property includes ownership by founding fathers of the town of Front Royal including George Cheek (1787), James Moore (1787), James Reid (1787-1802) and Thomas Buck (1802-1829) an early town trustee, justice of the peace, captain of Buck's Minute Men in the Revolution. Subsequent owners included a famed local educator, Samuel Simpson (1829-1838) "whose classical academy attracted students from far and near"¹⁶ and who was also a Warren County surveyor and sheriff.

E.C. /William Balthis Family (1838 – 1906): When the Balthis family bought the property, Front Royal was a prospering center for wagon manufacturing serving the lower Shenandoah Valley. The property served dual purposes as the family's residence and place of business. As a successful family of blacksmiths, the Balthis family was part of the emerging middle-class in the mid-nineteenth century and it was during their ownership that the two surviving additions were made to the house.

By 1838, when the Balthis family bought the property, Front Royal was a prosperous center for wagon manufacturing.¹⁷ As a well-traveled trade route, Chester Street was the site of several wagon manufacturing shops and the supporting trades for this industry. Following a then common practice in Front Royal, the Balthis property served dual purposes as the family's residence and the location of their blacksmith shop. The Gilkeys, a family of plumbers and tinsmiths, continued this tradition

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into the mid-twentieth century after they bought the house from the Balthis family in 1906.

During the Civil War, the Balthis family helped a Confederate soldier and neighbor, Green Berry Samuels, a delegate from Warren County to the Reform Convention of 1850 on 14 October in Richmond,¹⁸ avoid capture by hiding him in the attic between the original and newer parts of the house.¹⁹ He was married to A.R. Boone's daughter, who lived next door on the site of the present Chester House. This is significant in that Green Berry Samuels's nephew, Dr. Bernard Samuels, a New York City ophthalmologist, purchased the house in the mid-twentieth century and felt it was worth saving, even making it into a museum, due to his family connection with the property.

Gilkey Family (1906 – 1952): Plumbers and Tinnerns

Like the Balthis family before them, the Gilkey family ran their business from this property. A 1915 advertisement for "Gilkey & Son, Contractors for Steam and Hot Water Heating Plants, Tin and Slate Roofing, Spouting and Roof Painting, Plumbing and Plumbing Goods" lists their business address as Balthis' Old Stand, Front Royal, Va.

Bernard Samuels (1952-1961): Dr. Bernard Samuels bought the property from the Gilkeys in 1952. He was the son of Confederate soldier Green Berry Samuels who was hidden from a Federal raid in Balthis House. Dr. Samuels returned to Front Royal to honor his father's memory by making the Balthis House into a museum. Upon his death, the house, restored to the Civil War period with salvaged building elements and furnished with local, period-appropriate antiques, was left to the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA) to be opened as a museum. The APVA declined the bequest and the house was sold into private ownership, the antiques dispersed at auction.

H.B. and Clara Long (1961-1967): When the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities declined Dr. Samuels's bequest the Longs bought the property.

Edna Balthis/Balthis Land Trust (1967-1985): Once again, a relative with a connection to the house bought it with hopes of making it a museum. However, upon her death it was revealed that the house would be sold with the proceeds benefiting a charitable cause in England.

Kemper W. and Sally W. Miller (1985-2000): Kemper Miller was the general manager for local radio station WFTR during the time he resided at Balthis House with his family.

Warren Heritage Society (2000-present): The Warren Heritage Society bought the Balthis House in 2000.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Samuels, *Balthis House Notes*, 11.
- ² Ibid., 11.
- ³ Ibid., 11.
- ⁴ *History Highlights of Front Royal*.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Couper, *History of the Shenandoah County: Volume II*, 1118.
- ⁷ Ibid., 814.
- ⁸ Hale, *On Chester Street: Presence of the Past, Patterns of the Future*, 54-58.
- ⁹ Ibid., 89-91.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 111-124.
- ¹¹ *Walking Tour: Front Royal, VA*.
- ¹² Hale, *On Chester Street: Presence of the Past, Patterns of the Future*, 40.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 191-192.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 211.
- ¹⁶ Hale, *On Chester Street: Presence of the Past, Patterns of the Future*, 203.
- ¹⁷ *History Highlights of Front Royal*.
- ¹⁸ Couper, *History of the Shenandoah County: Volume II*, 792
- ¹⁹ Hale, *On Chester Street: Presence of the Past, Patterns of the Future*, 206

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Verbal Boundary Description

The boundary of the nominated property (.5676 acres) is shown as the solid black line on the accompanying map as recorded in Warren County Deed Book 304, page 281.

Boundary Justification

The nominated property includes the entire parcel historically associated with the house with the exception of the former northwest corner of the property as given to The United Daughters of the Confederacy, Warren Rifles Chapter and recorded Warren County Deed Book 157, page 58.

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**All photographs are of:
Balthis House
Town of Front Royal, Warren County, Virginia
VDHR FILE # 112-0009-000
NEG. NO.: 21158, 21159
CREDIT: Prewitt S. Scripps
DATE: January 2004
NEGATIVES FILED: Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Richmond, Virginia**

1. VIEW OF: West elevation looking east
PHOTO 1 of 11 (roll #21159 – negative #3)
2. VIEW OF: South elevation looking northeast
PHOTO 2 of 11 (roll #21159 – negative #5)
3. VIEW OF: North and east elevations looking southwest
PHOTO 3 of 11 (roll #21159 – negative #14)
4. VIEW OF: North and west elevations looking southeast
PHOTO 4 of 11 (roll #21159 – negative #24)
5. VIEW OF: South wall of parlor and hall stair looking south
PHOTO 5 of 11 (roll #21158 – negative #1)
6. VIEW OF: East wall of dining room in ell looking east
PHOTO 6 of 11 (roll #21158 – negative #21)
7. VIEW OF: Rear of house with kitchen and smokehouse, looking east
PHOTO 7 of 11 (roll #21159 – negative #19)
8. VIEW OF: North and west elevations of kitchen looking southeast
PHOTO 8 of 11 (roll #21159 – negative #8)
9. VIEW OF: North and west elevations of smokehouse looking southeast
PHOTO 9 of 11 (roll #21159 – negative #7)
10. VIEW OF: West and south elevations of loom house looking east
PHOTO 10 of 11 (roll #21159 – negative #11)
11. VIEW OF: West elevation of summerhouse/gazebo/playhouse looking east
PHOTO 11 of 11 (roll #21159 – negative #12)

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Endnotes

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¹ Samuels, *Balthis House Notes*, 9.

² Ibid., 10.

³ Ibid., 9.

⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁹ Ibid., 2-3.

¹⁰ Hale, *On Chester Street: Presence of the Past, Patterns of the Future*, 201

¹¹ Samuels, *Balthis House Notes*, 11.

¹² Ibid., 11.

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¹ Samuels, *Balthis House Notes*, 11.

² Ibid., 11.

³ Ibid., 11.

⁴ *History Highlights of Front Royal*.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Couper, *History of the Shenandoah County: Volume II*, 1118.

⁷ Ibid., 814.

⁸ Hale, *On Chester Street: Presence of the Past, Patterns of the Future*, 54-58.

⁹ Ibid., 89-91.

¹⁰ Ibid., 111-124.

¹¹ *Walking Tour: Front Royal, VA*.

¹² Hale, *On Chester Street: Presence of the Past, Patterns of the Future*, 40.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 191-192.

¹⁵ Ibid., 211.

¹⁶ Hale, *On Chester Street: Presence of the Past, Patterns of the Future*, 203.

¹⁷ *History Highlights of Front Royal*.

¹⁸ Couper, *History of the Shenandoah County: Volume II*, 792

¹⁹ Hale, *On Chester Street: Presence of the Past, Patterns of the Future*, 206